

Michigan Department of Education

Message #125 - School Mental Health and Achievement Gap

The link between mental health and academics

In the US, approximately 20% of children and adolescents suffer from a mental illness resulting in mild functional impairments and an estimated 10% have moderate to severe impairments.¹ In Michigan, according to 2011 Youth Risk Behavior Survey results, 27% of our high school students felt depressed, resulting in 32% of depressed students making D's and F's in school. Subsequently 16% of our youth expressed seriously considering suicide and 8% made attempts. Finally, in communities with low social economic status, it has been found that teachers spend on average 200 hours a school year on classroom management/discipline issues². This equates to five work weeks of time! When mental health concerns are not addressed, the achievement gap widens.

A Discussion of the Problem

We know that a student's mental health impacts their school success. We also know that when rates of poverty are high, so are rates and risks for youth to develop mental health challenges. Research shows that "increased physical, social and emotional well-being can improve academic performance."³ Studies indicate that "rates of absenteeism and tardiness are much higher for students with mental health disturbance"⁴ and "emotional, behavioral and social difficulties diminish the capacity of children to learn and benefit from the educational process".⁵ Addressing mental health in the schools is crucial for quality of life but could also be the difference between life and death.

Diminishing resources have limited the availability of student support services in school districts around the state. Many times, school social workers are funded to work primarily or only with the special education population, while school counselors are relegated to creating and attending to student's class schedules. Finally, school psychologists typically focus on testing and evaluating students to determine if they qualify for special education services. Rarely does it appear that any district has enough support services available to address their student body needs.

The Alternative

In February 2010, the Michigan State Board of Education adopted the Policy on Integrating Mental Health in Schools. This provided school districts with 14 recommendations to increase awareness, decrease stigma and improve the mental health and social emotional well-being of their students and school environment as a whole.

The MDE is responding to this need for improving mental health in schools. It has provided two rounds of mini-grants to school districts to work on a number of the Policy recommendations and to establish their own local school mental health policy. Additionally, an online School Mental Health Toolkit was developed that hosts resources for school administrators, staff and families around mental health. Teacher trainings have occurred throughout the state utilizing the Eliminating Barriers for Learning (EB4L) curriculum, resulting in positive administrator/teacher responses and improved outcomes. Trainings for pre-service teachers are in process. Finally, work to adopt Common Core Standards for Social Emotional Learning as a companion document to the recently adopted Common Core Standards for academics looks promising.

Call to Action

Learn more about the link between school mental health and the achievement gap at www.michigan.gov/schoolmentalhealth . Find resources, information on the EB4L teacher training and the Mental Health in Schools Policy visit www.michigan.gov/schoolmentalhealthtoolkit .

¹ Duchnowski, Kutash, & Friedman, 2002; Power, Eiralkdi, Clarke, Mazzuca & Krain, 2005.

² Eric Jensen, Teaching with Poverty in Mind. Pg 134.

³ "Health & Academics: Making the Link" Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000.

⁴ (Gall, 2000).

⁵ (Rones & Hoagwood, 2000).